Race to the Top

ACCELERATING COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS IN STATES

Achieve

Standards and Assessments

Race to the Top (RTTT) provides states with an historic opportunity to accelerate their efforts to graduate all high school students prepared for college and careers. Internationally-benchmarked college and career readiness expectations will be the foundation for all strategies undertaken with Race to the Top funding. In fact, serious work towards adopting common, internationally-benchmarked college- and career-ready standards and assessments is a *prerequisite* for states to earn RTTT resources. Adopting common college- and career-ready standards and assessments is not enough to advance bold reform and win RTTT funding, though. States should seize the opportunity RTTT provides to align their policies and supports for students *and* teachers with the common standards and assessments so that they are truly translated into the classroom.

Adopting Common College- and Career-Ready Standards

State standards used to reflect a consensus among subject matter experts about what would be desirable or important for young people to learn. They did not take into account what postsecondary institutions, training programs, and employers expected of high school graduates. As a result, too many students across the country met state standards, passed state tests and completed state-required courses only to be placed into remedial courses once they enrolled in college or found they were unqualified for training programs and skilled employment in the modern workplace. They may have been proficient, but they were obviously not prepared.

Over the last several years, 23 states have worked to address this problem by aligning their high school standards with the real-world expectations of employers and postsecondary faculty. The proposed RTTT *State Reform Conditions* criteria for standards and assessments ask all 50 states to adopt common, college- and career-ready, internationally-benchmarked standards (see Table 1). Common standards, anchored in what it takes for students to be ready for college and careers, will provide a dramatic boost to school improvement efforts across the country, and they should form the foundation of all RTTT efforts.

Common Core State Standards Initiative. Forty-eight states are participating in the landmark Common Core State Standards Initiative led by the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers, in partnership with Achieve, ACT and the College Board. The end-of-high-school standards are being vetted by states and revised this fall, and the K-12 standards will be completed over the winter.[1]

By collaborating across state lines to adopt common standards, states will finally be able to compare "apples to apples" when looking at achievement and attainment results. Because algebra will finally be algebra, no matter the state, states will be able to build better assessments and leverage a range of other high-quality

This guide is one of a series of papers Achieve has prepared to help states maximize the opportunities presented through the Race to the Top Fund (RTTT). In accompanying papers, Achieve addresses recommendations for leveraging P-20 longitudinal data systems, turning around low performing schools, and improving teacher effectiveness. Taken together, these papers offer advice to help state leaders develop comprehensive RTTT reform strategies firmly anchored in the goal of college and career readiness for all students. The full set of RTTT papers is available at http://www.achieve.org/RacetotheTop.

tools designed to help educators and students succeed. Teacher standards for preparation and performance, curriculum tools and student supports, and professional development strategies all can be based on the same foundation of evidence-based, internationally-benchmarked expectations.

For these reasons and more, Achieve urges states to work closely with each other and the national partners to adopt the Common State Standards.

Building Support for Common Standards. Adopting new standards is never easy, so states should reach out to stakeholders now to get them engaged in the process. In particular, states should involve classroom educators, principals, administrators, students, parents, civic and business leaders, and other key stakeholders in reviewing the common standards, identifying alignment (and gaps) with current expectations, and building support for adoption. In addition, engagement and collaboration with higher education leaders and faculty is essential in order for states to ensure that the college- and career-ready standards will have credibility with the postsecondary community.

Table 1: Race to the Top Draft Criteria: College- and Career-Ready Standards and Assessments

Reform Conditions Criteria: *A state's **past progress** in creating conditions for reform*

#1: Developing and adopting common standards:

- For Phase 1 applications: The state is participating in a consortium with a significant number of states that is working toward jointly developing and adopting, by June 2010, a common set of K-12 standards that are internationally benchmarked and that build toward college and career readiness by the time of high school graduation.
- For Phase 2 applications: The state has adopted, as part of a multi-state consortium with a significant number of states, a common set of K-12 standards that are internationally benchmarked and that build toward college and career readiness by the time of high school graduation.

#2: Developing and implementing common, high-quality assessments:

- The state is participating in a consortium with a significant number of states that is working toward jointly developing and implementing common, high-quality assessments aligned with the consortium's common set of K-12 standards that are internationally benchmarked and that build toward college and career readiness by the time of high school graduation.

Reform Plan Criteria: *A state's **plans for future efforts** to advance reform*

#3: Supporting the transition to enhanced standards and high-quality assessments:

- The state, in collaboration with its participating districts, has a high-quality plan for supporting a statewide transition to and implementation of internationally-benchmarked K-12 standards that build toward college and career readiness by the time of high school graduation and high-quality assessments tied to these standards. State or district activities might include: aligning high school exit criteria and college entrance requirements with the new assessments; developing, disseminating, and implementing curricular frameworks and materials, formative and interim assessments, and professional development materials; and engaging in other strategies that translate the standards and information from assessments into classroom practice.

The criteria above reflect the *draft* guidance issued by the U.S. Department of Education in July 2009. As of September 2009, they had collected public comments but had not yet released final guidance. Final guidance will be available at: http://www.ed.gov/recovery.

Building Aligned Assessments Anchored in College and Career Readiness

RTTT offers states an exciting opportunity to work together to build common assessments aligned to common, college- and career-ready standards. The potential benefits of common assessments are significant: higher quality measures, cost savings for states, opportunities for innovation, and, of course, the ability to compare results across state lines.

The U.S. Department of Education has indicated that it will reserve $350 million of the $4.3 billion in the RTTT fund for a separate competition – tentatively scheduled for spring 2010 – to enable states committed to common standards to build common assessments. The promise of these additional resources should provide an even greater incentive for states to think strategically about collaboration on assessment.

The specifics around this common assessment fund have not yet been released (the Department expects to provide draft guidance this Fall), but it is not too soon for states to begin thinking about what's most important for them to accomplish *with their own state assessment systems*, and which areas are *most ripe for collaboration* on common assessments.

Make College and Career Readiness Central. In most states, high school assessments measure knowledge and skills students learn early in high school or even middle school.[2] Without a much greater emphasis on the advanced high school content students need to be successful in postsecondary education and training opportunities, state assessments will not provide the critical information that teachers, parents, and students need to evaluate students' progress towards college and career readiness.

The ability to measure college and career readiness should be a critical design feature of any successful state assessment system proposed under RTTT or the separate multi-state competition. This concept of readiness does not apply only to high school assessments; it should extend down to the elementary and middle grades as well. Assessments should be designed with a clear eye toward measuring students' readiness for their next steps all the way along the educational continuum – with the ultimate destination being postsecondary education or training. To accomplish this, states should:

- ***Develop and/or adopt large-scale anchor assessments*** aligned to the college- and career-ready standards for the end of high school. These anchor assessments should be given to all students, statewide and, unlike today's crop of high school exams, "*proficient*" on the tests should mean students are *prepared* for success after high school. These assessments could take several different forms, such as end-of-course exams in advanced courses; cumulative assessments taken toward the end of high school; or modified college entrance exams. But their primary purpose should be to determine if students have met the college- and career-ready standards in reading, writing and mathematics for the end of high school.

- ***Ensure these assessments are validated by the state's two- and four-year postsecondary systems*** as good indicators of students' readiness for credit bearing college courses. The assessments should help identify gaps in students' knowledge and help educators determine what interventions and supports students may need to become fully prepared. Results on these assessments should be honored by postsecondary institutions so that students scoring "college-ready" are considered prepared for credit bearing courses without the need for remediation.

- ***Vertically align or moderate all statewide summative assessments to the anchor assessment.*** Once the anchor assessment(s) are identified or built, all statewide assessments should be vertically moderated to the anchor assessment(s), including any other large-scale assessments given statewide earlier in high school and the tests for elementary and middle school. The goal is for students, parents, and educators to know whether students in any tested grade are on-track towards meeting the college- and career-ready standards by graduation.

As states develop their RTTT applications, they should consider plans to:

- Partner with higher education leaders and faculty to determine what it would take for results from the high school anchor assessment(s) to be used for placement into credit-bearing entry-level courses and/or admissions. It is important to begin now to develop a process for reaching agreement between K-12 and higher education, which will likely include faculty participation in test development, as well as predictive and concurrent validity research studies, among other things. One of the best examples of this validation and system alignment is in California, where results from the 11th grade Early Assessment Program (EAP) signal whether students are ready for college-level English and mathematics. [3]

- Use technology more innovatively to deliver the common assessments. Advancements and innovations in scoring technologies now enable states to reduce scoring time, complexity and costs. In Indiana, for example, results on the online version of the high school end-of-course exams are available within 24 hours.

Collaborate on the Design and Development of Diagnostic and Performance Assessments. It won't be sufficient to measure college and career readiness and support students and educators in meeting new standards if states rely solely on large-scale, summative assessments. States should use the opportunity RTTT provides for increased quality and enhanced collaboration through the common assessment consortium to build a richer, more coherent approach to assessment.

- ***Interim assessments*** given at the end of lessons, units, or semesters aligned to the Common State Standards should be made available to all teachers. Given the plethora of products on the market, states and districts should collaborate to develop (or identify) high-quality interim assessments aligned to the standards.

- ***Formative assessment*** training and support for K-12 classroom educators is another opportunity for states to advance their goals via RTTT. Teachers are eager for this help so that they can align their daily instruction with college- and career-ready standards. States and districts should use RTTT funds to encourage greater formative assessment literacy through improved teacher training and professional development.

- States should collaborate with districts and each other to develop ***performance assessments*** that will help educators measure the full range of college- and career-ready standards. On-demand, large-scale assessments can measure many things well, but some important college- and career-ready skills, such as performing contextualized tasks that involve extended analysis, research, or communication, are better measured through performance assessments. States should consider building performance measures – including laboratory experiments, research papers, team projects, essays, portfolios, presentations, exhibitions, and constructed-response questions on statewide assessments – into their assessment systems.

  Getting performance assessments right at the state level has proven challenging. States have struggled with the cost, the workload burdens on teachers, and the inconsistency of expectations in scoring. States and districts should consider using RTTT funds to provide professional development to classroom educators and ensure sufficient development, scoring and other supports to do performance assessment right.

Existing Common Assessment Consortia Show This Can Be Done

The ADP Mathematics Assessment Consortium

In the fall of 2005, nine American Diploma Project (ADP) Network states came together with support from Achieve to develop specifications for a common end-of-course exam in Algebra II. Their goals were to use the exam to improve curriculum and instruction, ensure a consistent level of content and rigor in classes within and across their states, and allow cross-state comparisons of performance and progress over time. Six additional states have since joined the partnership, bringing the total number of participating states to fifteen.

The ADP Assessment Consortium states worked with Pearson Educational Measurement to develop the test, and it is now entering its third year of administration. A subset of the ADP Assessment Consortium states have also developed a common Algebra I end-of-course exam, with exam standards vertically aligned with the Algebra II exam so results will indicate student readiness for advanced high school mathematics courses.

The states in the ADP Assessment Consortium had another important goal as well: to use the exams to improve college readiness. The questions on the Algebra II end-of-course exam and the process for establishing the performance levels were designed to signal whether students have mastered the knowledge and skills that are necessary for success in entry-level, credit-bearing college mathematics courses.

Early results indicate that there is much work to be done to improve students' postsecondary preparation in mathematics, and participating states are taking steps to strengthen their standards, provide supports to teachers and students, and attach meaningful incentives (such as placement into credit-bearing postsecondary mathematics courses) to encourage students to earn a college-ready score. For more information on the ADP Assessment Consortium, please visit http://www.achieve.org/ADPAssessmentConsortium.

The New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP)

In 2005, the New Hampshire Department of Education, the Rhode Island Department of Education and the Vermont Department of Education came together to design, develop, and administer a set of grade-level expectations and tests, initially in mathematics, reading, and writing and later including science. The states partnered together to create the assessment framework, while each state revised their own curriculum to match the new assessments. Maine joined NECAP and administered the first exams in 2009.

Reading and mathematics tests are administered in grades 3-8 and 11. Writing tests are administered in grades 5, 8 and 11, while science exams are administered in grades 4, 8 and 11. By joining together, the NECAP states have been able to save the costs associated with creating assessments for four states; ensure students who may move between states do not fall behind on their education; and pool brain power to create the best possible assessments for the students of New England.

Bringing College- and Career-Ready Standards into the Classroom

RTTT suggests a variety of strategies states might use to support educators and students in the transition to new, common, college- and career-ready standards and assessments aligned to those standards. We will focus on several of the most important ideas for advancing college and career readiness and illustrate how a state might best design and implement them.

Adopting the Common Core State Standards will impact a wide range of state and district policies and practices. Achieving true system alignment will likely mean that rigor must be increased across the board, while at the same time there will be fewer, more streamlined expectations. Curriculum, coursework, and high school graduation requirements will need to be aligned to the Common Core State Standards. Teacher training and support will need to be updated and upgraded. And students will want multiple pathways to achieve the Common Core State Standards.

To help meet these challenges, states should use the resources provided through RTTT to fully implement aligned high school graduation standards, courses, curriculum, and teacher supports. In addition, states should think carefully about how to link the strategies they propose in this area with the strategies they are proposing in the areas of improving teacher and leader effectiveness. There are strong linkages between the support current teachers need in order to retool their instruction to help all students achieve and the policies states need to put in place to recruit, train, license, and support future teachers. For a more in-depth discussion of ways states can leverage RTTT to implement policy solutions in these areas, please see Achieve's accompanying guide *Race to the Top: Accelerating College and Career Readiness in States – Teacher Effectiveness*.

Ensure All Students Have Access to a College- and Career-Ready Course of Study. The research is clear: The courses a student takes in high school are a stronger predictor of postsecondary success than poverty, SAT scores, grades, or parents' education.[4] Nearly every state requires students to study specific subjects for a certain number of years or take specific courses to graduate, but 31 states do not require a college- and career-ready curriculum. Since 2005, 19 states and the District of Columbia have raised their expectations for future graduating classes to four years of rigorous English and three or four years of mathematics through intermediate algebra. Most of these states have put in place safety net provisions that enable students and their parents to "opt out" of the higher graduation standards when they deem it appropriate.[5]

Simply adopting new standards, however, does not guarantee all students will be enrolled in a course of study that ensures they will successfully acquire the knowledge and skills needed for success after high school. Requiring students to complete a course of study that reflects the rigorous content included in the standards – and not just numbers or names of required courses – will provide them with the foundational preparation needed to enter and successfully complete entry-level, credit-bearing college courses, training,and apprenticeship programs. *States that have not already adopted graduation requirements aligned to the expectations of college and careers should make this a priority in their RTTT strategy.*

Ensure All Students Have Strong Incentives to Complete a College- and Career-Ready Course of Study. States should use RTTT as an opportunity to bring together K-12 and higher education faculty to evaluate how the new standards and the high school course-taking requirements and assessments aligned to them can be used to increase the percentage of students enrolling and succeeding in postsecondary education.

Students need to know that what they learn and the tests they take in high school matter for them after

graduation. States should align their K-12 exit requirements – as reflected by a college- and career-ready course of study – with the requirements for entering credit-bearing courses in higher education so that students can move seamlessly from graduation to their next step. Some states, such as Indiana, have gone a step further and aligned the minimum set of courses required for admission to the state's four-year postsecondary institutions with the high school graduation requirements. It is particularly important in states with an opt-out provision for high school graduation requirements to provide students with a strong incentive to take a rigorous curriculum.

In addition, states can target merit-based financial aid to low-income students who successfully complete a college- and career-ready course of study. This type of incentive will help open doors to students and give them the real-world incentive they may need to complete more rigorous graduation requirements.

As described above, tying postsecondary course placement policies to the new statewide anchor assessments is also an essential step to reduce postsecondary remediation and increase student success. Taken together, aligning entrance, placement, and financial aid policies with K-12 standards will go a long way toward ensuring that students take their high school experience seriously – and that they are able to enroll, persist, and succeed in postsecondary education and training.

Ensure the Curriculum Follows the Standards. Enrolling students in courses with the right names isn't enough to ensure that they are getting college- and career-ready skills. State leaders also need to take steps to make those courses sufficiently and consistently rigorous and high-quality across the state. States should use RTTT to develop model courses and instructional materials and ensure high school teachers are prepared to teach college- and career-ready courses to *all* students. Encouraging high school faculty and postsecondary faculty to collaborate on these tools will help benchmark high school courses against college- and career-ready expectations.

States should consider plans to use RTTT funds to translate the college- and career-ready standards into the curriculum by:

- Working with districts and with other states to develop and disseminate a full suite of K-12 ***instructional materials*** aligned to the newly-adopted common college- and career-ready standards: for example, lesson plans, units, student work, and sample assignments scored against rubrics. Bring together classroom teachers, including high school and higher education faculty within your state and across state lines, to co-develop the instructional tools.
- Developing ***model courses*** at the high school level, with supporting materials and resources. In mathematics, RTTT gives states an opportunity to not only strengthen the traditional mathematics sequence through and beyond advanced algebra, but also to develop additional pathways that allow for more applied approaches to the curriculum.
- Using ***technology to disseminate the courses and provide professional development*** (perhaps using technology, such as videos of expert teachers) to train all middle and high school teachers in the standards and courses. Connect this strategy to your RTTT data systems proposals by determining how these instructional materials can be delivered via web-based portals that provide real-time feedback and data on student learning to educators.
- ***Increasing student participation in advanced course-taking and dual enrollment*** with pilot programs testing new funding mechanisms that encourage collaboration between school districts and postsecondary institutions.

Innovate with Course Delivery. More rigorous college- and career-ready standards do not mean that states need to adopt one-size-fits-all courses and curriculum. States should consider plans to use RTTT funds to ensure that students have multiple pathways to learning the content knowledge and skills included in the college- and career-ready standards:

- Since STEM is a "competitive priority" in RTTT, states should explicitly link their STEM initiatives to their efforts to help more students, especially low-income or low-performing students, meet increased mathematics and science course-taking expectations. For example, the Texas STEM Initiative supports more than 45 schools, including 23 charter schools, serving more than 16,000 low-income and minority students. T-STEM Academies illustrate how non-selective schools can implement a rigorous and relevant curriculum with four years of mathematics and four years of science through instructional delivery methods including project- and problem-based learning.

- RTTT funds at the district or state level could be used to help high school faculty teaching traditional and CTE courses, higher education faculty, and industry-based experts/instructors co-develop and co-teach courses with equivalent rigor and content. In Washington, the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges and the State Board of Education are working with several leading school districts to co-develop an applied course that will have equivalent rigor to the Algebra II course required for all students under state law.

- States might also consider developing pilot programs with districts that want to test innovative approaches that move away from the Carnegie unit and toward standards-based credits. States like Oregon and Rhode Island have experimented with "credit for proficiency" approaches that enable students to demonstrate what they know and are able to do (for example, through assessments, work samples, projects, or daily assignments). Experience in these states indicates, however, that moving toward proficiency-based credit is complex, and states should approach this issue carefully and encourage more experimentation and innovation.

Common, college- and career-ready, internationally-benchmarked standards and assessments should serve as the foundation for states' RTTT strategies. These standards will help align the high school curriculum with the demands of postsecondary education and careers, and the development of common assessments aligned to those standards gives states a significant opportunity to improve the quality of their assessments dramatically, as well as to reduce costs and allow for comparability of results across state lines. We strongly encourage states to use these unprecedented resources to ensure that their standards and assessments – and the curricular materials, tools, and course-taking requirements and incentives aligned to them – are anchored in college and career readiness so the entire system drives towards that goal.

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ENDNOTES

[1] See www.corestandards.org for more information.

[2] Achieve, Inc., *Do Graduation Tests Measure Up? A Closer Look at State High School Exit Exams*, 2004. Availabile at http://www.achieve.org/files/TestGraduation-FinalReport.pdf.

[3] Achieve, Inc., *Transforming High School Assessment Systems: A Guide for State Policymakers*, 2008. Available at http://www.achieve.org/files/TransformingStatewideHighSchoolAssessmentSystems.pdf.

[4] Clifford Adelman, *Answers in the Toolbox: Academic Intensity, Attendance Patterns, and Bachelor's Degree Attainment*, 1999, and *The Toolbox Revisited*, 2006.

[5] Achieve, Inc., *Aligning High School Graduation Requirements with the Real World: A Roadmap for States*, 2007. Available at http://www.achieve.org/files/Achieve_PolicyBrief_Dec18v4.pdf.